

VZCZCXRO2682
PP RUEHDBU RUEHIK RUEHYG
DE RUEHBUL #5810/01 3460323
ZNR UUUUU ZZH

P 120323Z DEC 06
FM AMEMBASSY KABUL
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 4817
INFO RUCNAFG/AFGHANISTAN COLLECTIVE
RUEHZG/NATO EU COLLECTIVE
RUEKJCS/Joint STAFF WASHINGTON DC
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHINGTON DC
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 3373
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHINGTON DC
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHINGTON DC
RUEKJCS/OSD WASHINGTON DC
RHEHAAA/NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL WASHINGTON DC
RHMFIUU/HQ USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 03 KABUL 005810

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E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: PREL PGOV INR AF
SUBJECT: PRT/PANJSHIR: KABUL-PANJSHIR RELATIONS PART I: THE PROVINCE IN THE CAPITAL

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: Relations between the valley province of Panjshir and the capital city of Kabul have evolved this past year. Panjshiris in the central government maintain their prominence, although the sacking of Abdullah Abdullah as Foreign Minister this spring caused some resentment in the province. The main political change has been the emergence of Panjshir Governor Bahlul as an active presence in the capital, lobbying for his province. His relations with President Karzai, however, have worsened, punctuated by a few sharp exchanges over policy at a recent governors' conference. Road projects have strengthened ties between the province and capital, creating an increasing volume of traffic. Improving the road link will have the greatest long-term impact on relations. END SUMMARY

¶2. (U) In terms of political, commercial and people-to-people ties, the PRT has witnessed several dramatic changes between Panjshir and Kabul this past year. This is the first of two cables on the subject. Part I examines the role of Panjshiris in Kabul. Part II will report on Kabulites in Panjshir.

Official Delegation

¶3. (U) Panjshiris, our contacts tell us, possess a sense of exceptionalism based primarily on the Massoud-led resistance against the Soviets and later the Taliban. Meshrano Jirga member Aref, a Panjshiri, calls it "a special psychology." Panjshiris are proud of their strong representation in the central government, which includes First VP Massoud, Wolesi Jirga Speaker Qanooni, NDS Director Saleh, Meshrano Jirga member Aref (a former NDS Director) and Army Chief of Staff Bismalluh Khan, a high-powered delegation, they say, for a small-sized province.

¶4. (U) Panjshiri exceptionalism, our contacts continue, also translates into a sense of entitlement for positions of power in Kabul, and a sense of resentment if expectations are not fulfilled. We hear grumblings when Panjshiris are sidelined

in Kabul. For example, when Dr. Abdullah was sacked as Foreign Minister this spring, or when, earlier, Fahim Khan was released as Defense Minister. The charge that the GOA is elbowing aside Panjshiris is a constant refrain we hear in our political talks in the valley.

Lobbying Effort

¶15. (U) Governor Bahlul, at the urging of the PRT, has emerged as a strong Panjshir lobbyist in Kabul. He travels to the capital regularly. He moved his wife and five children to Kabul earlier this year, mainly to take advantage of better schools. He has forged a strong political alliance with VP Massoud and, although not a Panjshiri, Education Minister Atmar. The Embassy's Fourth of July reception illustrated the Governor's tack. He hobnobbed with Massoud and Qanooni, but spent most of his time talking with Atmar on education matters, a high priority for the province. Bahlul has also attended several of the Ambassador's receptions in Kabul for visiting American governors.

¶16. (U) Members of the Provincial Council (PC) occasionally travel to Kabul on official business. The three women PC members tell us they encounter less resistance working in Kabul than in Panjshir. The PC Chairman, Behaduri, joined his Afghan counterparts in late summer to report directly to Karzai on provincial challenges. In his overview, Behaduri reportedly told Karzai of the positive conditions in Panjshir-- above all, that the province was free of poppy cultivation and terrorist activity.

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Policy Clash

¶17. (SBU) The Governor is circumspect on airing his views of President Karzai. He often evades questions from visitors on the subject, for example, with Management U/S Fore earlier this year. Privately, he tells us he receives scant support from Karzai. Bahlul spent months, without success, trying to arrange a meeting with Karzai to discuss Kabul-Panjshir ties. Karzai, he said, kept rebuffing him. Their only channel was through Saleh at NDS but, as Bahlul admitted, his own ties with Saleh were strained and the dialogue with Karzai stifled.

¶18. (SBU) Bahlul's moment of interaction with the President came on Nov. 21-22 in Kabul at a counter-narcotics conference chaired by Karzai and attended by all Afghan governors. Karzai reportedly chided the assembled governors, and Bahlul felt singled out, for cultivating contacts with the international community at the exclusion of the GOA. Bahlul told us he was disturbed by the criticism, since he had found contact with the President virtually impossible.

¶19. (SBU) On the conference subject of counter-narcotics, Karzai called on the governors to take a bigger role. Bahlul, according to the read-out he gave us, queried Karzai in plenary session: Why has the central government -- with all its counter-narcotics resources, including an entire ministry, failed in its effort and then turned to the governors to address the poppy problem? Karzai's answer, Bahlul reported to us, was incoherent.

¶10. (SBU) Another clash came the next day, Nov. 22, at the same seminar. Again, Bahlul spoke out during the conference, this time questioning Karzai's "abdication of responsibility" in allowing the Helmand governor to broker the Musa Qala deal. Such authority, Bahlul reportedly argued, belonged at the central level, not provincial; and such an agreement with the Taliban, however indirect, was a grave mistake. The Kandahar governor also voiced criticism of Musa Qala. Karzai reportedly turned to the Interior Minister for a reply and

left the room. Bahlul summed up his relations with Karzai after their exchanges: "more direct, more honest, and worse off."

Panjshir Fraternity

¶11. (SBU) Panjshiris have a habit, contacts tell us, of leaving the valley but never losing their identity. According to Wolsei Jirga member Regestani, a Panjshiri, there may be more Panjshiris outside the valley than inside. A local joke plays on this theme: When astronauts make it to Mars, they may well find a watermelon and, inside it, a Panjshiri. The Panjshiri community in Kabul numbers in the multiple thousands. They rallied this past May to help reconcile the feuding Bahlul and Saleh, two of the most prominent Panjshiris. VP Massoud and MJ member Fahim Khan presided over a large gathering at the Intercontinental Hotel, over two hundred Panjhshiris, according to an eye-witness account. The event symbolized the close-knit Panjshir society, even in its Kabul version. Bahlul and Saleh embraced before the group in a gesture of reconciliation, with the assembled Panjshiris acting as witnesses.

¶12. (U) There is another group of Panjshiris in Kabul, our contacts report. These are the thousands of young men who have moved to the capital to seek jobs and education. Many, we understand, have landed in the security sector as guards, a reflection of their mujahideen background. Their remittances in support of their families are an important financial stream into the province. The May 29 riot in Kabul

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involved many Panjshiris who had resettled there recently. MJ member Fahim Khan told us he became personally involved, along with WJ Speaker Qanooni, to urge quiet among the Panjshiris that day.

¶13. (U) The Governor told us that Panjshiris have "two lives: a home in the valley and an apartment in the capital." Most officials in the provincial administration, including the Governor and Deputy Governor, spend weekends in Kabul with their families. By the start of the weekend, on Thursday afternoon, official business comes to a halt as Panjshiris strike out for the capital. The USAID-funded road projects now connect the valley with the capital almost entirely by paved surface. It has accelerated the trend of Panjshiris heading to Kabul, either for weekends or for resettlement. Fahim Dashty, the editor of Kabul Weekly, told us he can drive from his Panjshir home to his Kabul office in just over two hours, admittedly "at a crazy speed." Earlier, it took half a day.

COMMENT

¶14. (SBU) In terms of Kabul-Panjshir relations, the single most transformative force this year has been the USAID-funded road project. It has paved the way for more intense political, commercial and people-to-people interaction. On the political side, the PRT has encouraged Governor Bahlul to raise his profile in Kabul to lobby for his province. In countless conversations, we have laid out the rationale for a Panjshir advocacy in GOA corridors: extending the reach of the GOA into the provinces starts with extending the reachback of the Governor to the capital. Panjshiris, through their lobbying, are now more active in pulling the GOA into the province. As Part II of this series will report, we see little of the GOA pushing into the province.
END COMMENT.

NEUMANN